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Study of average length of tenure of the chief administrative officer (past and present) of a college or university, based on more than a thousand responses from institutional members of the National Commission on Accrediting. Study shows "that the average length of service of the *current* presidents in office at all types of colleges and universities is 8.3 years." Data are presented by type of institution, type of control, size of enrollment, type of student body, and geographic region.

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How Long Is a College President?

WILLIAM K. SELDEN

If you believe, as many do, that the average length of tenure of a college president is four years, you're in for a surprise. It's just another of the myths of the trade

How long is a college president? Or more precisely, what is the average length of tenure of the chief administrative officer of a college or university?

This question began seriously to interest me during the past summer when both for pleasure and for a book review which I was writing I read a spate of books by university presidents. Two of these authors, who enjoy well deserved respect, included comments about the short term of office of college and university presidents and referred specifically to the average in recent decades as being about four years. The more I reflected on these undocumented but categorical statements the more I wondered if this figure might not represent a myth—a myth that had been perpetuated by inertia. No one had taken the time or energy to study the facts on a wide basis.[1] On further reflection I realized that I was in a strategic position to undertake the task of proving whether this oft-quoted figure of four years is fact or fiction.

Each September the National Commission on Accrediting distributes membership bills to the 1300 eligible colleges and universities in this country of which well over 1100 are current members. Since this represents the broadest institutional membership of any organization in higher education we appeared to be in the best position to try and answer the question with the least amount of effort. Consequently a short questionnaire and explanation were enclosed with each membership bill when they were mailed this past September to the president of each of the 1300

1. "The Evolution of Administrative Offices in Colleges and Universities" by Earl J. McGrath (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1933) reports on the position of the president and other administrative offices in 36 institutions between 1860 and 1933.

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colleges and universities. The information solicited included the date on which the institution first began operation, the number of presidents since that date, the name and years of office of each president since 1900, and notations as to type of institution, type of control, size of enrolment and whether the student body comprised men, women or both.

Since the questionnaire appeared relatively inoffensive and since it involved the position of the individual to whom it was addressed, we expected a generous return. The response, however, was a bit overwhelming. Within a period of only a few weeks and with no follow-up requests, over a thousand responses were received. This 78 per cent return, in which few responses were not usable, proved to us among other things that questionnaires may be a downright nuisance to those to whom they are sent but the work entailed in filling them out involves much less effort than is required of those who must correlate and study all the completed replies. Even though only a few items were involved in this questionnaire, and even though punch cards and machines were employed for part of the computations, we soon felt like the sorcerer's apprentice. Every time we finished with one, two more arrived.

But the gratification of being able to scotch the myth—for myth it proved to be—of the four-year average for college and university presidents amply compensated for the tedious hours spent in analyzing the replies. Even more important, in a year when there has been considerable publicity about the early resignations of a few college presidents, facts are the best answer to those who paint only with dark colors on their palettes and underrate the attractions of the position of chief administrative officer of our institutions of higher education.

* * *

Length of tenure is by far not the only factor of importance in any position. Yet it is measurable and may be symptomatic of other more significant factors. Long tenure may indicate congeniality and capacity of an individual for the position as well as confidence in him on the part of the trustees, faculty, students and alumni. On the other hand, a long tenure may indicate an erosion of vitality in the institution and an avoidance of responsibility on the part of the trustees. In fact, both situations may occur at different times in a long administration. The most dramatic example is that of Eliphalet Nott.

Assuming the presidency of Union College in 1804 at the age of 31, Nott strengthened and developed a shaky institution which had been in

financial difficulties during the presidency of Jonathan Maxcy, a former president of Brown University and afterwards first president of the University of South Carolina. But Nott's presidential term of 62 years, unequaled anywhere else, ended with dubious value to him and to the college. In his latter years he was subject to accusations of financial misappropriation which were undoubtedly damaging to the college as well as himself. This incident was followed by a stroke which in time incapacitated him and limited his educational usefulness but not his power to hold the office. Nott relinquished this power only with death in 1866 at the age of 93.

Although compulsory-retirement regulations would not now permit such a death-grip on a presidency, those who bemoan the mythical tenure of four years speak with seeming reverence for such long-term presidents as:

James Burrill Angell – 38 years at the University of Michigan (1871–1909)
Frederick W. Boatwright – 51 years at the University of Richmond (1895–1946)
Nicholas Murray Butler – 44 years at Columbia University (1901–1945)
Charles Lewis Cocke – 55 years at Hollins College, Virginia (1846–1901)
B. B. Dougherty – 52 years at Appalachian State Teachers College, North Carolina (1903–1955)
Charles W. Eliot – 40 years at Harvard University (1869–1909)
J. Allen Holt – 39 years at Oak Ridge Military Institute, North Carolina (1875–1914)
Charles E. Hyatt – 42 years at Pennsylvania Military College (1888–1930)
J. L. Jarman – 44 years at Longwood College, Virginia (1902–1946)
William F. King – 43 years at Cornell College, Iowa (1865–1908)
James H. Kirkland – 44 years at Vanderbilt University (1893–1937)
Laur. Larsen – 41 years at Luther College, Iowa (1861–1902)
E. O. Lovett – 39 years at Rice Institute, Texas (1907–1946)
William F. Peirce – 41 years at Kenyon College, Ohio (1896–1937)
I. N. Rendall – 40 years at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania (1865–1905)
Rush Rhees – 35 years at the University of Rochester (1900–1935)
Howard E. Rondthaler – 40 years at Salem College, North Carolina (1909–1949)
Virginia Alice Cottey Stockard – 41 years at Cottey College, Missouri (1884–1921 and 1925–1929)
J. A. Thompson – 43 years at Tarkio College, Missouri (1887–1930)

Booker T. Washington – 34 years at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama (1881–1915)

Innocent Wolf, O.S.B. – 44 years at St. Benedict's College, Kansas (1877–1921)

James M. Wood – 35 years at Stephens College, Missouri (1912–1947)

Mary Emma Woolley – 37 years at Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts (1900–1937)

This list of former presidents who have celebrated not merely their silver anniversary but over thirty years in office and who have served at least part of their tenure in this century could be increased more than fourfold. They represent all types and sizes of institutions and most of the geographical regions of the country. They do not, however, include individuals who have served as presidents at more than one institution such as:

Edwin A. Alderman – 35 years at the University of North Carolina (1896–1900), Tulane University (1900–1904) and the University of Virginia (1904–1931)

Cloyd Heck Marvin – 37 years at the University of Arizona (1922–1927) and George Washington University (1927–1959)

Rufus B. von KleinSmid – 33 years at the University of Arizona (1914–1921) and the University of Southern California (1921–1947)

Henry M. Wriston – 30 years at Lawrence College (1925–1937) and Brown University (1937–1955)

This roll can be augmented even further by consecutive presidential tenures of extraordinary length at such institutions as:

Agnes Scott College, Georgia – Frank Henry Gaines, 34 years (1889–1923), and James Ross McCain, 28 years (1923–1951)

Belmont Abbey College, North Carolina – Leo Haid, O.S.B., 42 years (1882–1924), and Vincent G. Taylor, O.S.B., 32 years (1924–1956)

Bowdoin College, Maine – William DeWitt Hyde, 32 years (1885–1917), and Kenneth Charles M. Sills, 35 years (1917–1952)

Clark University, Massachusetts – G. Stanley Hall, 31 years (1889–1920), and Wallace W. Atwood, 26 years (1920–1946)

Haverford College, Pennsylvania – Isaac Sharpless, 30 years (1887–1917), and William Wistar Comfort, 23 years (1917–1940)

MacMurray College, Illinois – Joseph R. Harker, 32 years (1893–1925), and Clarence P. McClelland, 27 years (1925–1952)

Milwaukee-Downer College, Wisconsin – Ellen C. Sabin, 26 years (1895–1921), and Lucia R. Briggs, 30 years (1921–1951)

National College of Education, Illinois – Elizabeth Harrison, 34 years (1886–1920), and Edna Dean Baker, 29 years (1920–1949)

Stevens Institute of Technology, New Jersey – Henry Morton, 32 years (1870–1902), Alexander Humphreys, 25 years (1902–1927), and Harvey Davis, 23 years (1928–1951)

Vassar College, New York – James Monroe Taylor, 28 years (1886–1914), and Henry Noble MacCracken, 31 years (1915–1946)

In this study various interesting situations have been noted. In some cases presidential succession has seemed to involve filial inheritance. Isaac C. Ketler who organized and was president of Grove City College, Pennsylvania for 37 years (1876–1913) was soon followed by his son, Weir C. Ketler, whose term extended for 40 years (1916–1956). At nearby Muskingum College in Ohio, J. Knox Montgomery served as president for 27 years (1904–1931) and was succeeded in 1932 by his son, Robert N. Montgomery, the current president, who had previously headed Tarkio College, Missouri for two years (1930–1932). In like manner, Franklin B. Moore, president of Rider College, New Jersey for 36 years (1898–1934), was succeeded by his son, Franklin F. Moore, who has continued to serve as president for 25 years and may well equal if not surpass his father in length of service.

Juaniata College, Pennsylvania, whose current president, Calvert N. Ellis (1943–), succeeded his father, Charles C. Ellis (1930–1943), is also noted for the fact that, among three Brumbaughs who have served as the institution's chief administrative officer, I. Harvey Brumbaugh probably holds the all-time record for length of service as an acting president. Before he was made president (1911–1924), he served for more than eleven years in the anomalous position of acting president (1900–1911). The longest family regime can be claimed by the Campbells. In 1887 James A. Campbell founded an academy in North Carolina which was transformed into a junior college in 1926 and was understandably named Campbell College. Serving for 47 years as the chief officer (1887–1934), the father ultimately gave way to the son, Leslie H. Campbell, who is completing his 25th year as the institution's second president.

Lest it be concluded that successive long tenures now current are being completed only by the sons of their predecessors, other examples deserve mention. At Augustana College, Illinois, Conrad Bergendoff who

is currently in his 25th year was preceded by Gustav Andreen, president for 34 years (1901–1935). Herbert D. Welte, now in his 31st year at Central Connecticut State College, followed Marcus N. White, president for 35 years (1894–1929). And Ralph Waldo Lloyd has already completed 29 years as successor to Samuel Tyndale Wilson who was president of Maryville College, Tennessee for a like period (1901–1930).

The roster of presidents with long tenures is not complete without mention of others currently in office who were inaugurated around a quarter century or more ago. Again different types and sizes of institutions are represented.

Sister M. Columkille – 36 years at Incarnate Word College, Texas (1923–)

James L. Conrad – 28 years at Nichols College of Business Administration, Massachusetts (1931–)

Roy Ellis – 33 years at Southwest Missouri State College (1926–)

Grady Gammage – 33 years at Arizona State Teachers College (1926–1933), and Arizona State University (1933–)

Dominion R. Glass – 37 years at Arkansas-Haygood College (1919–1928), and Texas College (1931–)

Irvine S. Ingram – 27 years at West Georgia College (1932–)

Jacob Johnson – 26 years at Connors State Agricultural College, Oklahoma (1933–)

Mordecai W. Johnson – 33 years at Howard University, District of Columbia (1926–)

Gladys Beckett Jones – 29 years at the Garland School, Massachusetts (1930–)

Albert N. Jorgensen – 24 years at the University of Connecticut (1935–)

Lawrence T. Lowrey – 34 years at Blue Mountain College, Mississippi (1925–)

Sister M. Madeleva – 25 years at St. Mary's College, Indiana (1934–)

Clyde A. Milner – 25 years at Guilford College, North Carolina (1934–)

Arthur M. Murphy – 25 years at Saint Mary College, Kansas (1934–)

William C. Pressly – 33 years at Peace College, North Carolina (1926–)

John W. Raley – 25 years at Oklahoma Baptist University (1934–)

Irving T. Richards – 25 years at Cambridge Junior College, Massachusetts (1934–)

Theodore P. Stephens – 26 years at Aurora College, Illinois (1933–)

Paul R. Stewart – 38 years at Waynesburg College, Pennsylvania (1921–)

H. W. Stilwell – 32 years at Texarkana Junior College, Texas (1927–)

Ila D. Weeks – 24 years at the State University of South Dakota (1935–)

From this generous list of presidents with long tenures it is apparent that a national four-year average could be attained only by a compensatingly large number of one- or two-year terms such as my own at Illinois College (1953–1955). But, as already has been indicated, the four-year average is not a fact but a myth.

* * *

What do the statistical results in this study show?

Average Length of Service of Current Presidents—Probably the most interesting statistic derived from this study shows that the average length of service of the *current* presidents in office at all types of colleges and universities is 8.1 years—twice the assumed or mythical four-year average for completed terms of office. Among the various classified groups, the range of averages for current presidents is from 5.8 years for Catholic institutions, where rotation in office, although less widely practiced than in the past, is a limiting factor on tenure, to 9.7 years for teachers colleges, both public and private. The lowest averages, after the Catholic institutions, were found in institutions for men only (6.2 years), specialized institutions (6.3 years), and all institutions in the thirteen Western states (6.9 years). After the teachers colleges, the highest averages were found for all institutions in the nine states of the South Central section of the country (9.1 years) and for all colleges and universities throughout the country with an enrolment between 1000 and 2000 students (9.0 years).

These statistics become even more significant when they are compared with length of time current top executives have served in their positions in some 600 of the largest corporations throughout the country. *Fortune* reported in November 1959 that 52 per cent of the 1700 corporation officials included in their study have served less than six years and fewer than 15 percent have served for fifteen years or more.[2] The comparable figures for the college and university presidents are strikingly similar—50 per cent for six years or less and 13.3 per cent for fifteen years or more. In other words, there is relatively little difference in average length of service between these two groups of current executives.

The comparison between the two groups could be carried further. Donald K. David, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, has said that "the principal job of the chief (cor-

2. Similar conclusions were reported in *Business Week*, 9 June, 1956.

poration) executive (in the 1920's and earlier) was the economic concern, the operation of the business. Now the top executive spends relatively little time on that. A fair share of his time is spent on relations with the Government and the public, in concern with the attitudes of employees, stockholders and customers." Could this statement not be paraphrased with equal validity for the college and university president by the substitution of only a few words?

The principal job of the college president in the 1920's and earlier was the educational concern, the operation of the curriculum. Now the president spends relatively little time on that. A fair share of his time is spent on relations with the Government and the public, in concern with the attitudes of faculty and other employees, alumni and students.

Educational institutions in the United States, just as business and industrial corporations, are subject to economic, political and social influences. These influences quite naturally and appropriately call for changes to meet changing conditions, and the position and functions of the chief administrative officer, whether in business or in education, must adjust accordingly. Without adjustment both types of institutions run a serious risk of failing in their missions.

Average Length of Service of Former Presidents–Despite the apparent changes in the functions of the college and university presidency, there has been no reduction in the average length of administrations in institutions of higher education. The results of this study show that for the colleges and universities founded before 1900 the average of the institutional averages, since the dates of founding, for the length of term of the chief administrative officer, whether president or acting president, is 10.1 years. In comparison, the average of the averages of all institutions since 1900 is 10.3 years–an increase; and by excluding from consideration the acting presidents the average of the institutional averages since 1900 rises further, to 11.4 years.

Further comparisons prove to be interesting. For reasons that have already been noted in relation to current presidencies, the Catholic institutions have the shortest average terms of all the classified groups, whereas independent, non-church-related colleges and universities have averaged longer administrations than institutions under other types of control. Institutions in the New England and South Eastern areas have provided higher averages than other sections of the country, especially the Western states where the average is lowest.

In most classified groups of institutions, as may be seen in the appended tables, the average length of administrations in this century is longer than the over-all average since the date of founding for those institutions founded before 1900. There are a few exceptions, however, such as institutions with present enrolments under 500, colleges for women only and junior colleges. In the case of the junior colleges it should be remembered that most of those which were founded before 1900 were originally created as some other type of institution and have been transformed in more recent years into junior colleges.

In fact, the classification of institutions as to type is not a simple matter. For example, teachers colleges are being transformed in rapid fashion into general colleges and in some cases into universities. One president wrote that as of the moment his institution is a liberal arts college but by action of his board of trustees it will become a university on 1 January 1960. Although he did not so state, no doubt the president realizes that, for the present at least, this sudden metamorphosis involves the name alone. True universities are not created that easily. We classified his institution as a liberal arts college.

This study, exploding the myth of the four-year average of college and university presidents, demonstrates that there continue to be long-term presidents despite the recent publicity of a few early resignations. Looking to the future it is interesting to project that, assuming retirement at 68, Nathan Pusey will still be president of Harvard University in 1975 after 31 years in an office which he first assumed at Lawrence College in Wisconsin (1944–1953). By 1981 James S. Coles will have had time to complete a 29-year term as president of Bowdoin College, Maine, the position which he and his two predecessors have filled since 1885. And by 1987 Robert F. Goheen, at the age of 68, will have been able to complete a 30-year term in the presidency of Princeton University, in which his immediate predecessor, Harold W. Dodds, served for 24 years (1933–1957).

The long-term college or university president, then, is not a creature of the past. He and his short-term brethren are with us just as they were present in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their functions may be changed but so are social conditions and demands. Those who accept a presidency should do so not with the nostalgic delusion that the functions of the office have remained constant and fixed but rather with the expectant realization that whether the term is short or long the period of office will be filled with kaleidoscopic demands of vital social significance.

Few other offices have such transcendent influence on the future development of our society as that of the college and university president. Despite derogation and disparagement, attention must be given continually to the preparation and selection of individuals who can fill the position with dignity for the institution and enlightenment for society.

This study was intended to fill only a small part in the gap of knowledge of the American college and university presidency. The material which has been collected will be available for others who are able and willing to pursue these studies further. For them and others the following tables which summarize some of the findings should be of interest.

Average Lengths of College and University Presidencies

The following tables show the averages in years of the institutional averages of lengths of college and university presidencies.

Column *A* gives the averages from the dates of founding, excluding institutions founded after 1900 and excluding current presidents.

Column *B* gives the averages from 1900 for all institutions, excluding current presidents.

Column *C* gives the averages from 1900 for all institutions, excluding current presidents and acting presidents.

Column *D* gives the averages for current presidents only, excluding acting presidents.

The figures in parentheses indicate the number of institutions from which averages could be derived in the particular classifications.

	A	*B*	*C*	*D*
All institutions	10.1 (485)	10.3 (927)	11.4 (932)	8.1 (949)
	By type of institution			
Junior colleges	11.5 (40)	8.7 (189)	9.2 (188)	7.8 (210)
Liberal arts colleges	10.3 (238)	10.5 (424)	11.2 (424)	7.9 (423)
Universities	8.8 (135)	9.3 (180)	11.4 (180)	8.1 (179)
Teachers colleges	11.8 (55)	12.8 (106)	13.8 (106)	9.7 (106)
Specialized institutions	13.1 (17)	14.2 (30)	15.6 (30)	6.3 (31)
	By type of control			
Tax-supported	9.2 (153)	9.7 (351)	10.7 (351)	8.3 (367)
Independent	12.7 (129)	12.6 (199)	15.0 (198)	8.8 (205)
Catholic	6.8 (42)	8.2 (151)	8.3 (151)	5.8 (151)
Protestant	10.0 (162)	10.3 (227)	11.4 (227)	8.6 (226)

	A	B	C	
		By size of enrolment		
Under 500	10.3 (82)	9.7 (212)	10.4 (211)	7.5 (219)
500 to 999	10.9 (134)	11.1 (258)	11.9 (258)	8.0 (265)
1,000 to 1,999	10.1 (109)	10.6 (202)	11.7 (202)	9.0 (207)
2,000 to 4,999	9.6 (77)	10.9 (130)	12.2 (130)	7.8 (132)
5,000 and over	8.5 (83)	9.5 (127)	10.9 (127)	7.8 (126)
		By type of student body		
Men	9.4 (41)	10.3 (64)	11.7 (64)	6.2 (69)
Women	12.7 (53)	11.7 (157)	12.3 (156)	7.5 (157)
Co-educational	9.9 (391)	10.1 (708)	11.2 (708)	8.3 (723)
		*By geographical region**		
New England	12.2 (42)	13.3 (82)	14.7 (81)	8.8 (89)
Middle Atlantic	10.8 (100)	10.7 (164)	11.8 (164)	7.8 (170)
North Central	9.7 (141)	10.6 (240)	11.7 (240)	7.9 (243)
Southeastern	12.7 (66)	13.0 (112)	13.9 (114)	7.6 (115)
South Central	8.6 (88)	8.9 (194)	9.5 (198)	9.1 (195)
Western	7.2 (48)	7.4 (135)	8.7 (135)	6.9 (137)

**New England:* Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

Middle Atlantic: Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.

North Central: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

Southeastern: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

South Central: Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas.

Western: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.